

Governor Linda Lingle



By Dan Boylan

Benchmarks haunt every elected official: the first 100 days for an American president, mid-term for any mayor or governor. At such junctures, reporters and editorial writers ask — in chorus: “So what have you done?” The next question is also rote: “What do you plan to do (in the next 100 days or two years)?”

On Jan. 24, Linda Lingle — Hawaii’s first female governor, its first Neighbor Island mayor to become governor, and its first Republican governor in 40 years — will deliver her third state-of-the-state address. It will mark the end of the beginning of her first administration, and the run-up to what she hopes will be her re-election to a second gubernatorial term in 2006.

Needless to say, near unanimity exists among Republicans on Lingle’s success as governor and on her many and varied strengths.

“She’s a good cheerleader,” says Rep. Barbara Marumoto. “A very up-beat person who can rally the troops, point us in the right direction, and get us marching.”

Says fellow GOP state Rep. Cynthia Thielen: “Gov. Lingle has a refreshingly open leadership style. She’s made people feel positive about Hawaii and what we can accomplish.”

Marumoto, veteran of 26 years in the Legislature. “Lingle has given people a lot of hope,” says Marumoto. “Business people are optimistic. The economy is cooperating.”



That it is. At 3 percent, Hawaii under Lingle now boasts the nation’s lowest unemployment rate. The economy is growing, and state tax revenues are up. The economy is

producing new jobs: 28,500 of them.

Some economists argue that the construction boom spurred by low interest rates and tourism's rebound from the shock of 9/11 have contributed more to the state's current prosperity than anything the governor has done.

But Republicans feel Lingle has done her share. "She's made fiscal responsibility a hallmark of her administration," says Republican state Sen. Gordon Trimble, "and the private sector has responded with investments that had been put off."

Lingle receives her greatest plaudits, according to Trimble, for her ability to "articulate issues well."

On that point, Democrats concur. "She's excellent at public relations," says state Rep. Roy Takumi. "That's her strength: projecting an image." Leeward state Sen. Bryan Kanno agrees: "Gov. Lingle's strength is communicating to the public. She does that well."

Democrats are less impressed with the Republican governor's interest in public policy.

"It is one thing to propose legislation; it's quite another to justify it," says Takumi. "Policy-making is hard work, much harder than calling a press conference and blasting away at the Legislature because we didn't agree with her on local school boards or some other issue."

"My concern is that Gov. Lingle has taken this tack of government by press release," says Kanno. "She hasn't come downstairs very often to work with us. She's threatened to get unelected those who stood in her way. That's not very collaborative. Anybody who comes to the Legislature with a proposal knows that it's the rare bill that makes it through in a single session. It takes months of generating support, building awareness of the issues, putting together coalitions, building community support. No one's picking on her. Nothing — nothing — gets through the Legislature without a lot of hard work."

So where does Lingle stand at mid-first term? Immensely popular among voters: Recent polls show that 64 percent of them approved the job she was doing as governor. But despite a six-page press release titled the "Lingle-Aiona Administration Accomplishments" issued by her office, she has yet to chalk up a major legislative victory.

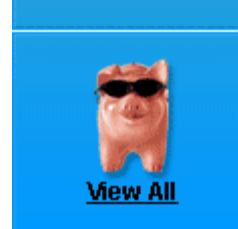


Instead, the state Legislature, dominated by Democrats, has frustrated her on school reform, ice legislation and crime legislation.

And in the 2004 elections, voters rejected six Republican legislative incumbents and all of the candidates for Board of Education who supported Lingle's proposal to establish local school boards.

So Lingle's reviews are mixed, and there is a glimmer of uncertainty about how long her gubernatorial show will run.

It's a long way from the ninth floor of the Maui County Building to the fifth floor of the state Capitol, and Lingle is the first to admit it. "The media are the big difference," she says. "The media attention on the governor is constant and intense. Even if nothing's happening. The media is lurking around here all the time."





By training a journalist herself, since her election Lingle has owned the Honolulu press corps — in part through the tireless efforts of the most visible member of her administration, communications press adviser Lenny Klompus.

But there've been other surprises in Lingle's move from Wailuku to Honolulu — some of them pleasant.

"I've been pleased with the caliber of people I was able to attract to my administration," says Lingle. "Frankly, I wasn't sure who would come forward." She mentions Mark Bennett in the Attorney General's office, Ted Liu at the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, and Mark Recktenwald at Commerce and Consumer Affairs.

Lingle also singles out Lt. Gov. Duke Aiona: "As a mayor, you're it. A governor has an L.G. We're a team. I think both Duke and I have been surprised at how well we get along."



While not accepting Democratic criticism of her policy-making, Lingle does say, "I wish I had more time on the policy side of the job. I'm not as enthusiastic about the social part of it. It was public policy that first attracted me to politics, but I came to realize — first as a mayor, even more as governor — that I represent Hawaii to the outside world. I've had to adjust my personality to the public role. Believe me, I don't

like having my picture taken. I don't like being on TV."

Add "the social part of it" to the business of governing, and Lingle regularly puts in 12- to 16-hour days. Consider a recent day. It began at 6:45 a.m. with lap-swimming at the Nuuanu YMCA pool. She was in her fifth-floor Capitol office by 9. At 10 she met for an hour with the director and his staff from the department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs regarding legislative proposals for the coming session.

At 11:15 Lingle was in a state car, being driven to a DOE luncheon honoring Hawaii Distinguished Schools at a Waikiki hotel. She, of course, spoke. Lingle was back in her office by 2 p.m. for two successive one-hour meetings: the first with people from the Attorney General's Office, the second with representatives from the Department of Accounting and General Services. The topic of both was legislative proposals for the

upcoming session.

At 4, Lingle met with her three key aides: chief of staff Bob Awana, senior adviser for policy Linda Smith, and senior adviser for communications Klompus. By 5:30 she was on her way to the Diamond Head home of Coast Guard Adm. George Wuerster for a dinner in her honor. But she wasn't done. At 9 p.m. Lingle arrived at the Filipino Women's Association 21st Anniversary Ball at the Pacific Beach Hotel. She spoke at 9:13. If she skipped the dancing, Lingle may have made it home by 9:30.

By the time Lingle delivers her state-of-the-state address, she and her staff will have put more than four months into preparing their legislative proposals and the governor's budget:

"Our proposals grow out of things I've been thinking about. Linda Smith is our liaison with the county governments, with the business sector, educators and healthcare providers. Each of the department directors bring forward proposals. They all have to be vetted with the entire cabinet, then linked with the budget."

Lingle's third legislative package will meet even more formidable Democratic legislative majorities than did the first two: 41-10 in the House, 20-5 in the Senate. Lingle appears unconcerned.

"We're in a transition period," she says. "Many legislators aren't used to people articulating positions and using the media to inform the public about the issues of the day. Many of them would prefer to work quietly and behind the scenes. It shouldn't be one way or the other. I don't take things personally. This is the first time in 40 years they've had to deal with a Republican governor. I will work together with them. But remember, the Democrats have brute political force on their side. They have the numbers. I think I've tried to reach out to them, and I think at this point they're more used to me."

Lingle minimizes GOP losses in the 2004 general election. "We lost five seats by an average of 86 votes," she says. "And there was a net gain in the sense of people who became involved in the political process. President Bush also gained more support in Hawaii over 2000 than in any other state."

Lingle served as George W. Bush's campaign chair in Hawaii and campaigned for him in some Mainland states. While she disagrees with him on some issues, she remains a Bush loyalist: "He gave an outstanding address on Social Security. It's an issue that has to be addressed. I admire him because he stands for something. There are so few people in politics willing to stand for something."

Lingle's ascent to the pinnacle of political power in Hawaii has been slow and steady — and marked by a single electoral defeat.

Linda Lingle was born Linda Cutter in St. Louis, Mo., in 1953, the daughter of Richard and Mildred Cutter. Her parents divorced when she was 12.

She first went to live with her grandparents, then with her Uncle Gerald Cutter, the owner of an automobile dealership in Southern California. She credits her Uncle Gerald with teaching her "the importance of integrity ... He taught me that your word was your bond. You live by it."

Linda Cutter graduated from Sherman Oaks High School in 1971 and from California State University-Northridge. She majored in journalism and married a man named Lingle. The marriage lasted a year, the name a lot longer.

After college, Lingle came to Hawaii, where her father was launching a Cutter

automobile agency. But she wanted a job in journalism and that led her to labor leader Art Rutledge and the associate editorship of the Hawaii Teamsters' Union Local No. 5 newspaper.

By 1976, Lingle departed for Molokai, where she founded *The Molokai Free Press*, the Island's only newspaper, and she covered everything from family parties to local sports.

At local government meetings, journalist Lingle found herself thinking that she could do a job better than many of the elected officials she was covering. In 1980, she gave up her reporter's notebook for a political leaflet and ran for the Molokai seat on the Maui County Council. She won.

Lingle spent 10 years on the Maui County Council, often as that body's only Republican. She watched the county budget closely and warned against too rapid development of the Island.

In 1985 she tried marriage again, this time with attorney William Crockett — a prominent Maui attorney, member of a kamaaina Republican family, and 26 years Lingle's senior. The marriage ended in divorce a decade later.

In 1990 term limits left the Maui mayoralty vacant. Lingle faced off against Maui Democratic legend and former county Mayor Elmer Cravalho, and beat him by 2,300 votes.

During Lingle's eight years as mayor, Maui was the only bright spot in Hawaii's depressed economy. Hotel occupancy rates remained high; unemployment rates low. Some called it the "Maui Miracle."

Lingle herself faced term limits in 1998, and a good two years out she began talking about challenging incumbent governor Ben Cayetano in 1998. It was an audacious move. No Neighbor Island mayor had ever successfully run for governor, nor had any woman ever held the office. Add that Lingle was born and reared on the Mainland, and she qualified as a long-shot at best.

Articulate, hard-working and a relentless campaigner, the long-shot came within a 5,000 votes of unseating Cayetano. Lingle immediately became the titular head of her party — and within a few months after the election — the chairman of the state Republican Party.

Despite her own impressive showing in 1998, Republicans held a mere 12 seats in the 1999 Legislature. So Lingle focused all of her energies on recruiting candidates for the 2000 elections — with notable success. The Republicans picked up seven seats in the House of Representatives, bringing their total to 19.

A future state senator, Gordon Trimble, volunteered at Republican state headquarters during Lingle's tenure as chair. "I worked at headquarters for 18 months," Trimble says. "I saw how she treated people, and she was my inspiration for running.

"Linda's a good judge of character. And she listens to people. You have to watch her do a meeting. She listens. Then she reaches her conclusions from what she's heard."

In 2002, her attention would shift to her own second try for the governorship. She raised a prodigious amount of money, greatly outspent Democratic rival Mazie Hirono, and campaigned relentlessly for months.

And she was running with the wind. "There was such a need for change," says Barbara Marumoto. "Cayetano had alienated many Democrats and independents. So many Democrats had gone to jail."

Lingle beat Hirono by more than 17,000 votes.

In the week between Christmas and New Year's 2004, Gov. Lingle held a news conference to announce five traffic initiatives. Representatives from Mothers Against Drunk Driving stood with the governor. So too did director of the Department of Transportation, Rod Haraga.

But Lingle included two Democrats in the assemblage: state Reps. Joe Souki and Kirk Caldwell. She also gave them an opportunity to speak.

A small gesture to be sure, and it may mean nothing. But it could mean a good deal.

"I'm optimistic," says Democrat Takumi. "The governor says she wants to promote school readiness. That's an issue Democrats and Republicans can agree on. We'll see. I've found that in the end, when a citizen calls me about a problem, he makes little distinction between Republican and Democrat, between executive and legislative. He just wants us to solve his problem."

Says Republican state Rep. Marumoto: "The Democrats in the Legislature feel they can stonewall the governor. But she has the power to release or restrict funding. Both sides have to realize they can't do it alone. There's a lot of room for dialogue."

The next two years will tell whether Lingle and the Democrats who dominate the Legislature can put aside partisanship and do some serious talking. The reputations of all — and the welfare of the state — depend on it.

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